

Growing strong adults from early childhood

Quality early childhood education is critical to academic and social development. **alison elliott** explores the unique challenges facing the NT.

first person



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The Northern Territory's unique social and geographic profile has resulted in a relatively small, but diverse and dispersed range of programs for young children. In metropolitan Darwin, early childhood services are much like those in other capital cities, albeit with staffing shortages that characterise many employment sectors. In more remote locations, children's services face a range of operational challenges associated with isolation and poor resourcing including difficulties in attracting qualified early childhood educators.

Research has long established the importance of the early childhood years to social and academic development. Culturally rich and nurturing environments provide optimal contexts for brain development and intellectual, physical and social growth. Positive early childhood experiences predict better academic achievement, school retention, and employment options and take-up.

Some of Australia's care and education provision is amongst the best in the world. We have "gold standard" early childhood centres but they are spread unevenly. In the mid-1990s we led the world in our national child care accreditation system, but this has struggled to accommodate the massive early childhood sector growth of the past decade.

The Federal Government came to office pledging to improve early childhood quality and create a world-class system of integrated early childhood learning and care. The aim is that by 2013, all children in the year before formal schooling will have access to quality, affordable, early childhood education for 15 hours a week, 40 weeks a year, delivered by degree-qualified, early childhood teachers in public, private and community-based preschools and child care settings.

This is no simple task. In the NT, as elsewhere, early childhood provision is patchy. There has been no integrated, whole-of-Territory or whole-of-community planning approach. And there is the tyranny of isolation. Sometimes, child care provision has been at the whim of commercial operators who focused more on shareholders' profits and property gains than building educational capital for children and families.

Across Australia, nearly one million children under school age participate in early childhood services and the sector is one of the nation's biggest employers. Some 50 or so child care centres in the NT catered for about 3092 children in 2006 (*Census of Child Care Services, 2007*). About half these were in the three-to-five age group. Some 19 per cent were four years old and many also attended Government preschools each week.

Child care centres range in size from 30 or so places to 75 places. A child care "place" may be occupied by more than one child because many children attend part-time. Child care also includes home-based, but supervised Family Day Care.

The NT has the highest proportion (34 per cent) of children attending child care full-time. This may reflect a combination of limited family support networks and greater full-time employment opportunities. Some 3272 children were enrolled in NT preschools in 2006: 1378 Indigenous children and 1894 non-Indigenous children (*DEET Annual Report 2006 – 2007*). The Productivity Commission's Annual Report for 2007 stated that nearly 80 per cent of eligible four year olds attended a preschool program in 2007.

Exact early childhood participation rates are difficult to determine because attendance data are collected in different ways and at different times, and there is no unique identifier for each child who enrolls. Counting is complicated because many children participate in more than one early childhood service. High family mobility also complicates counting.

There are two main types of services providing education and care to children from birth to five years of age in the NT: preschools and child care centres, sometimes known as early learning centres.

The Territory is a leader in preschool education. Most preschools are co-located on primary school sites and have administrative and educational ties to the school. Preschools, including mobile preschools, provide "sessional" education programs for four year olds for up to 12 hours a week. This will soon increase. In some cases, attendance is open to three year olds and, depending on family vulnerability, can be almost full-time. There is no limit to the number of preschool places the government funds but, understandably, provision of a preschool teacher is linked to minimum enrolments. This makes provision difficult in remote areas with small, highly mobile populations.

In addition to on-site preschools, mobile preschools operate in a range of very remote areas to service small communities. The mobile preschool visits each community for about two days a week. It is staffed by a qualified teacher (not necessarily an early childhood teacher) and on-site teacher assistants.

Child care centres are the second main type of early childhood service. Accredited child care centres enable families to access the Child Care Benefit, a subsidy to help parents afford the service. Most early learning centres are technically "child care centres". Some provide a strong educational program and employ qualified early childhood staff. At present, however, there is no requirement for NT child care centres to employ a qualified early childhood teacher.

Other types of early childhood services in the NT include Commonwealth-funded Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services and crèches. These "budget-based" services are primarily for Indigenous children, and are not required to meet normal national accreditation standards. They include long day care, playgroups, outside-school-hours-care, school holiday care and other culturally relevant programs.

The national diversity in early childhood service quality and access is polarised in the Territory. We have some of the



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best and worst services. The NT Government-funded preschools and the early learning centres attached to Catholic and Independent schools are among the best nationally and internationally. Unfortunately, some of Australia's most problematic early childhood services are also in the Territory, especially in remote locations. They are housed in dirty and neglected facilities, with limited staffing and resources. Some sit outside the national child care accreditation scheme so there is little quality control.

Extreme staff shortages across the sector nationally are exacerbated in remote locations. Not surprisingly, families and children don't want to participate in poor-quality early childhood services, so some centres sit virtually empty.

The NT Government strategy, *Closing the Gap of Indigenous Disadvantage: A Generational Plan of Action* (Aug 2007) addresses specific challenges that affect Indigenous Territorians. *Closing the Gap* strategies include improving early educational outcomes for all Territory children and enhancing developmental and educational outcomes for Indigenous children. Strategies include additional targeted early childhood services including mobile preschools.

The formation of an early childhood division in the NT Department of Education and Training, movement of child care administration to the NT Department of Education and Training, the assent of the *Care and Protection of Children Act* and a new Children's Commission should all boost early childhood provision, access and quality.

The high proportion of young children in the Territory makes quality early childhood especially important. NT communities are the most youthful in the country. In June 2007, 51,800 children (24.1 per cent) were aged 15 years and under from the NT's population of 218,000 overall. There were an estimated 3642 four year olds. Some 40 per cent of NT children are Indigenous and the Indigenous population is growing at twice the annual projected rate for the wider Australian population. By 2013 Indigenous children will comprise 50 per cent of all Territory children.